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**Decolonising the Body of Naples:  
Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels**

**Abstract:** This article addresses the construction of Naples in Elena Ferrante's "Neapolitan Novels" (2011–2014) with reference to Ramona Fernandez's theorization of the "somatope." It reads the relationship between Elena and Lila as a heuristic for that between the cultured "northern gaze" on Naples and the city as the object of that gaze, as constructed in the historical repertoire. Paying close attention to the ideological underpinnings of Elena's educational trajectory and embodiment of national culture, I argue that the construction of Lila-Naples as an unruly subject is posited in order to be critiqued, in accordance with critical perspectives deriving from feminist and postcolonial theory. I conclude by highlighting the evolution of the values associated with Lila and Elena over the course of the tetralogy to facilitate the recuperation of Neapolitan alterity and to propose a new way of writing the city beyond the colonizing gaze of the cultural tradition.

**Key Words:** Elena Ferrante; Neapolitan Novels; somatope; the body of Naples; feminist theory; postcolonial theory.

**Introduction**

Since the advent of modernity, the city has been construed as a privileged space for the interrogation of modern life, with authors, painters and cineastes striving to express the corporeal and psychological effects of urbanization, with its advanced technologies, changing social realities and new temporal rhythms. Such cultural explorations are complemented by the development of a vast body of scholarship addressing the embodied experience of urban space: the bodily tactics and practices associated with discrete urban spaces, on the one hand, and the bodily experience of the city by differently abled, gendered, classed and raced bodies engaged in discrete acts of traversing, walking, mapping, seeing, touching, smelling, shopping, leisure, etc. Of rather less interest to urban

studies theorists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is the metaphorical alignment between bodies and cities that continues to pervade cultural representations of *certain* urban spaces, tendentially those deemed to deviate from an implied norm.

The city of Naples, long viewed as something of an anomaly with respect to the conventional alignment between the urban and the modern, represents a primary site for such discourses in Italy. A dramatic expansion of the population prior to industrialization coincided with the emergence of new bourgeois sensitivities to urban order, cleanliness and privacy in northern Europe and America to provoke an intensely ambivalent response among Grand Tour visitors to the chaos, clamour and filth of Naples, often experienced as an assault on the senses (Moe, 62). The reputation of the eighteenth-century city as a “demographic monster” (Moe, 62),<sup>1</sup> pulsating with plebeian bodies depicted by artists and writers in unremittingly intimate and sometimes grotesque detail, was followed in the late-nineteenth century by the explosion of corporeal metaphors characterising Naples as a living organism and identifying particular sites with distinct body parts and functions. In accordance with the more general feminization of cities in Italian language and culture,<sup>2</sup> the metaphorical body of Naples was inevitably gendered female. However, the metaphorical alignment between urban space and the female body appears heightened in the case of Naples; the legend of the city’s foundation on the site where the body of the lovelorn siren Parthenope washed ashore symbolically inscribes the first settlement of the city on the very body of its female namesake and cements the association between the city and the female body in the cultural imaginary.<sup>3</sup>

The historical legacy continues to be felt in contemporary discursive constructions of Naples and in the role played by the city in the Italian cultural imaginary. In particular, the conventional alignment of the corporeal and the female has embedded Naples in a series of discourses that are far from neutral in their connotations or effects. Historical associations between femininity, emotional turbulence, pathological impulsiveness and corporeal ungovernability underpin

<sup>1</sup> Moe reports that Naples nearly doubled its population in the space of a century, increasing from 200,00 to 400,000 inhabitants, with particularly dramatic increases after 1765.

<sup>2</sup> The grammatical femininity of the word “città” is complemented by the iconographical representation of the city as female, a practice that continues into the twentieth century. See, for instance, the sculptures of the “*madri nobili*,” the fourteen “noble cities” of Italy, on the Vittorio Emanuele II monument in Rome.

<sup>3</sup> Emblematic of the strong association between city and the female body is the four-hundred-year long misidentification of the ancient statue of the Nile in Largo Corpo di Napoli as a representation of Parthenope. On the ambivalence of the statue and its misreading, see Verdicchio and Iovino.

the traditional dichotomy between mind and body in Western thought. That dichotomy intersects with the series of binaries and hierarchies ingrained in the moralizing discourses of post-Unification *meridionalismo*, which characterized the Italian South — and Naples as its ultimate expression — as an uncivilized and barbaric place, in thrall to poverty and crime and in need of urgent corrective intervention on the part of the more civilized and modern north of the new nation-state (Moe, 170–76 and 228–36; Dickie, 61–63).<sup>4</sup> Within that broad prism, the people of Naples, considered “dissolute and weak by nature” (Gribaudi, 77) were specifically characterised as a “popolo donna” in contrast to the “popoli uomini” of the north (Niceforo, 247–48). As a result, the feminized and corporeal construction of Naples served to construe the city not merely as an urban other, a premodern city resistant to the homogenization of modernization,<sup>5</sup> but as “the suppressed, subordinated and negative counterpart” (Grosz, 3) to the presumed rationality of a normative model or system of modern urban development, implicitly gendered male.

Elena Ferrante’s tetralogy of “Neapolitan Novels” follows in the rich literary tradition of corporeal constructions of Naples but ultimately presents an important challenge to the ambivalent, even negative framing of the city in its metaphorical construction. The novels are centred on the intensely rivalrous lifelong friendship between two Neapolitan girls, Elena Greco and Lila Cerullo, but the narrative exploration of their struggle for self-realisation and independence opens out to encompass the fortunes of an entire community affected by the social, cultural and political transformation of Italy in the period from the 1950s to the third millennium. As elsewhere in Ferrante’s writings — as, indeed, in the wider corpus of literary constructions of Naples — the city exceeds its role as the primary setting of the tetralogy to impose itself as protagonist. In accordance with the literary tradition, Ferrante’s Naples is a distinctly feminized and embodied entity, constructed through a dense network of allusion to the Neapolitan writings of Matilde Serao, Anna Maria Ortese, Curzio Malaparte

<sup>4</sup> The foundational text of *meridionalismo*, Villari’s *Le lettere meridionali ed altri scritti sulla questione sociale in Italia* (1878), opens with the problem of organised crime in Naples, characterised as a natural and inevitable consequence of depressed economic and social conditions.

<sup>5</sup> Chambers’ formulation encapsulates the way in which the enigmatic, the feminized and the anti-modern come together in the cultural imaginary: “Naples confronts us like a riddle. Its sphinx-like qualities, reflecting back what we hope, and fear, to see, disclose an unstable hubris dissected by different cultures and historical rhythms” (73). Here, the orientalist and feminised connotations of the sphinx, the allusion to psychological dynamics of desire and fear, and the articulation of the city’s instability and hybridity all serve to depict Naples as Other to the presumed rationality of a normative model of urban development.

and Fabrizia Ramondino, among others.<sup>6</sup> However, the tetralogy's distinctively theoretical approach to the narrativization of Naples works to complicate established understandings of the relationship between body and city in the Neapolitan context and to disrupt the metaphorical alignment inherited from the literary tradition and inscribed within the tetralogy itself.

The centrality of the corporeal in the literary and wider cultural elaboration of Naples invites consideration of the cultural construction of the city as a "soma-topo" or "body place," in the terms outlined by Ramona Fernandez. Building on Mikhail Bakhtin's articulation of the chronotope as a fulcrum of time/space and of the human form as intrinsically chronotopic (84–85), Fernandez (1124) argues that the centrality of the body to contemporary narratives merits its isolation and naming as *somatope* (where "soma" signifies "the body of an organism" and "tope" connotes "place"). In Fernandez's theorization, the somatope

carries the weight of the obsessions of its narrative. The somatope encodes a host of meanings penetrating and surrounding the image of the body. The somatope and its feverish references bind all the seemingly unrelated phenomena within the text together. [. . .] In somatopic narratives, the body is the site that makes meaning and directs the plot. For what happens to bodies in the somatopic text determines the plot. And bodies in somatopic texts are almost always morphing or under contention. The image of the body is at dead centre of the narrative. The body is at the fulcrum of the narrative, and the narrative is enslaved to the body.

(1124)

Though elaborated with reference to cinematic narratives, Fernandez's conceptualization of the somatope speaks directly to the construction of Naples as a "body place" (Fernandez, 1124) in the Italian cultural imaginary.<sup>7</sup> In the case of Ferrante's tetralogy, the image of the body is both literally and figuratively at the centre of the plot; the narrative is enslaved to the richly allusive body of Lila which, even in its absence, motivates the genesis of the text and represents the fulcrum around which the narration revolves. In addition, both the body of the city and the bodies it contains are configured as elaborately semiotic or storied bodies, encoding a host of meanings and uniting apparently disparate

<sup>6</sup> There is a growing bibliography on Ferrante's literary influences. On Ferrante's reprisal of Serao's corporeal writing of the city, see Gallippi; on the parallels between Ferrante's Naples and that of Ortese, see Ricciotti; on intertextual references to Morante's *Menzogna e sortilegio*, see de Rogatis (*Parole chiave*), Porciani, and Donnarumma; and on the influence of both Morante and Ramondino, see Lucamante.

<sup>7</sup> An exemplary instance is Bruno's assertion that "Naples is not a city of the soul, it is a city of the body" (383).

phenomena; they determine the plot and are the site of meaning-making. Finally, the “Neapolitan Novels,” like the films discussed by Fernandez, are underpinned by a theoretical framework that is itself inherently somatopic. Parallels between Ferrante’s tetralogy and the theorization of Naples provided by Giuliana Bruno, Iain Chambers and Serenella Iovino share with the theorists named by Fernandez — Donna Haraway and Walter Benjamin — the interpolation of bodily figures in the invention and articulation of the theoretical frame. Of particular relevance to Ferrante’s worldview is Chambers’ postcolonial theorization of Naples, which appears to underpin the development of and disruption to the somatopic treatment of the city over the course of the tetralogy.

As intimated above, there are two primary aspects to the somatopic treatment of Naples in the Neapolitan Novels. To date, critical analysis has focused almost exclusively on the metaphorical aspect of the relationship between urban space and the body which has dominated since the late nineteenth century — on, that is, the alignment between Lila, implicitly the “amica geniale” of the first novel’s title, and the city of Naples as constituted in the cultural imaginary.<sup>8</sup> Yet, despite the consensus that has developed around the idea that “Lila is Naples” (De Rogatis, 134), the treatment of Naples in the tetralogy is not reducible to the metaphorical aspect of the relationship between urban space and the body. Equally important is the experiential aspect so prevalent in Grand Tour accounts of Naples as thrilling and overwhelming, “a bombardment of the senses” (Moe, 41), and the relevance of perspective and ideology to the way in which the city as experienced is framed and understood. Central to this second aspect is the figure of Elena and her role as narrator.

This article reads the relationship between Elena and Lila as a heuristic for that between Naples and what I term the “northern gaze” prevailing in the historical repertoire of discourses emerging from Grand Tour accounts of Naples and the moral geographies of post-Unification Italian anthropology. Paying close attention to the ideological underpinnings of Elena’s cultured gaze and the transformations wrought by her encounter with feminism, I argue that the construction of Lila-Naples as an unruly subject is posited in order to be critiqued in accordance with recent critical perspectives deriving from feminist and postcolonial theory. As I will show, over the course of the tetralogy, the values associated with both Lila and Elena will evolve to facilitate the recuperation of Neapolitan alterity and to propose a new way of writing the city beyond the

<sup>8</sup> To whom the “amica geniale” of the title refers is willfully ambiguous; while Elena’s narrative posits Lila as the brilliant friend with whom she strives to keep pace, at the end of the book it is Lila who expressly declares Elena to be “la mia amica geniale” (*L’amica geniale* 309).



corporeal frames so prevalent in the literary and cultural tradition. Given the well-established nature of the metaphorical alignment between Lila and Naples, I will treat that aspect concisely before advancing to interrogate the experiential aspect of the relationship between urban space and the body implicit in Elena's narratorial role; thereafter, I will address the shift to a new way of understanding the relationship between urban space and the body and a new way of writing the city that emerges in the light of Elena's encounter with feminist and postcolonial thought.

### **Metaphorical Embodiment: Lila as Naples**

From the very outset of the narration, Lila is invested with several prominent attributes associated with the construction of Naples in the literary tradition. A fascinating and seductive character, inspiring passionate attachment and enduring loyalty, she is also what Sara Ahmed might term an unruly or "willful subject." The contradictory nature of her character — simultaneously strong and fragile, beautiful and damaged, tender and intimidating, vulnerable and capable of extreme violence — marks her out as an ambivalent and potentially dangerous heroine. Frequently labelled "cattiva" and even, on occasion, "diabolica" or a "strega," Lila is configured as "la medium di una potenza magica" (De Rogatis, 135) conventionally ascribed to the city as home to a series of mysterious, supernatural or esoteric cultural practices.

Like Naples, Lila arouses intensely contradictory and destabilizing feelings in others, and at different points in the texts is implicitly or explicitly equated with the emblematic hybrid embodiment of Naples, the siren: we are told that she has "qualcosa di inafferrabile che seduceva e insieme allarmava, una potenza di sirena" (*Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta* 121); and, later, that she "restava la solita creatura inquieta con un'irresistibile forza di attrazione, e quella forza la rendeva speciale" (*Storia della bambina perduta*, 143). Spatially and emotionally fixed to Naples but moving adeptly and harmoniously between Italian and Neapolitan dialect, even her speech is identified by the rivalrous Elena as a unique and perfect fusion that encapsulates and for the first time gives eloquent voice to the essence of Naples.<sup>9</sup>

Lila is also, as has been observed, the material manifestation of an endless cycle of creation and destruction deemed characteristic of Neapolitan history (Serkowska, 19). The originality and ingenuity that underpins her intellectual

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed analysis of Lila's linguistic capacity and of her strategically controlled use of dialect and Italian, see Benedetti (178–83).

brilliance is accompanied by an independence and resourcefulness which casts Lila, throughout the four novels, as a fickle but almost Olympian figure, deploying “quel tono padronale, di chi fa e disfa come vuole” (*Storia del nuovo cognome*, 121) and who “crede che può fare sempre come pare a lei. Va, viene, aggiusta, rompe” (*Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, 149).<sup>10</sup> The language employed to convey this aspect of Lila’s character — which is exemplified by the highly suggestive act of cutting up and recomposing her own photographic likeness in an act of resistance to patriarchal power and the objectifying lens of the male gaze in *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta* — resounds with that employed to describe the history of Naples. Thus, Lila’s admission in *Storia della bambina perduta* that she is driven to “fare, rifare, coprire, scoprire, rinforzare, e poi all’improvviso disfare, spaccare” (163) is itself an undoing and remaking of the phrase employed by Elena’s father in relation to Naples in *L’Amica geniale*: “Napoli [. . .] era così da sempre: si taglia, si spacca e poi si rifa” (133).

Just as the continual undoing and reconfiguring of Naples’ urban texture is portrayed in the tetralogy as a defensive response designed to ward off a perennially threatening ancient disorder — characterised in *Storia della bambina perduta* as “smania di guastare, saccheggiare, deturpare, tirar fuori le ventraglie, e smania di edificare, ordinare, disegnare nuove vie o rinominare le vecchie, allo scopo di consolidare mondi nuovi e nascondere mali antichi, che però erano sempre pronti a prendersi la rivincita” (418–19) — so too Lila’s cyclical process of destruction and recreation is understood as a symptom of the pathological disorder that afflicts her. It is this, perhaps, that represents the strongest parallel between Lila and Naples. While pathological discourses and metaphors have long accompanied the literary representation of Naples, Ferrante’s innovation is in constructing Lila’s illness as corporeal in effect but psychological in origin. For Donnarumma (143), the experience of what Lila terms *smarginatura* is best understood as the clinical expression of a more diffuse, chronic syndrome conveying the sense that she, like Naples, is incoherent, incapable of governing her incomprehensible interiority and, thereby, resistant to the structures of regulatory modernity.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> As Serkowska (19) has noted, this description of Lila is highly evocative of the figure of the spider, a simile for poverty, in Ortese’s *Il mare non bagna Napoli*: “[. . .] disfaceva e rinnovava a modo suo quei miseri tessuti, invischiando sempre di più gli strati minimi della plebe, che qui è regina” (67).

<sup>11</sup> As has been noted, the term ‘smarginatura’ maps onto the term ‘frantumaglia’ deployed in *La figlia oscura* and explained in *La frantumaglia* as “un malessere non altrimenti definibile [. . .]. La frantumaglia era misteriosa, causava atti misteriosi, era all’origine di tutte le sofferenze non riconducibili a una sola evidentissima ragione” (125).



However, the condition points also in two other directions, closely related to literary and critical theory constructions of the city: on the one hand, the symptomatology of the *smarginatura* clearly alludes to the prominent theorization of Naples as porous, in the work of Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis, and of the city as *limen*, or threshold, in that of Massimo Cacciari. Such theorizations construct Naples as a city where temporality and historical processes are suspended and where boundaries between binary understandings of archaic and contemporary, male and female, rational and irrational, sacred and profane, simply dissipate in favour of hybrid and liminal forms. At the same time, however, the dispersive quality of the *smarginatura* and the resonance it shares with Lila's articulation of herself as an unnarratable palimpsest, points instead towards a writerly desire to escape the confines of narrative simplification and the weight of the literary tradition, and to give expression to a reality characterised by kaleidoscopic fragmentation.<sup>12</sup> In this way, the symptomatology of Lila's disorder parallels the notable tendency towards fragmentation or episodic narration in cultural representations of Naples and perhaps exemplifies Chambers' pronouncement that the value of Naples lies "not in its pretended uniqueness but in its capacity for dispersal, for losing itself and thereby escaping the predictable" (106).

Despite these evident parallels between the feminized corporeality of Lila and the construction of Naples in the literary and critical corpus, the categorical assertion that Lila is Naples is to my mind rather problematic. It is so, in the first instance, because at no point in the text does the narrating Elena explicitly compare Lila to Naples. Instead, Lila is firmly and exclusively associated in the mind of the narrator with the unnamed, ex-centric and distinctive urban space of her childhood neighbourhood: "Il rione per me era Lila," she states in the final volume (*Storia della bambina perduta*, 105). Although the distinction between the two spaces is sometimes blurred, for the majority of the tetralogy the *rione* — conceptualized as an atavistic and violent extension of the maternal and familial — is expressly distinguished from the city proper, which is construed as the space of cultural and historical narration. Secondly, the metaphorical embodiment of Naples is not restricted to Lila but extends elsewhere in the text (albeit to a less pervasive degree) to a series of equally allusive bodies, most notably the imperfect or defective body of Elena's mother, the queer body of Alfonso and, as we will see, the grotesquely enlarged, dead body of Gigliola.<sup>13</sup> The

<sup>12</sup> On the parallels between the articulation of Lila's *smarginatura* (*L'amica geniale* 172) and Ortese's articulation of "frantumazione" (*Corpo celeste*, 18–21), see Ricciotti (114).

<sup>13</sup> While much scholarship has been dedicated to the mother-daughter relationship in the Neapolitan Novels, the alignment between the mother and the city has been largely overlooked. On the parallels

dispersive quality of that metaphorical embodiment of Naples accords with the fragmentary representation of Naples in the wider cultural imaginary where, as Chambers puts it, “to be open to [...] the collective narration of identities and the exchange of memories that pass under the name ‘Napoli’ is clearly to abandon the possibility of conducting all these threads into a single conduit, a unique narrative able to explain such details” (74). Finally, to read Lila exclusively as the embodiment of Naples is to disregard the contribution made by the experiential dimension to the tetralogy’s construction and understanding of the city.

The exclusivity of the critical assertion that Lila is Naples exposes the way in which the relationship between urban space and the body has generally been reduced to the metaphorical aspect so prevalent in the historical repertoire of literary constructions of Naples, and how disembodied discourses about Neapolitan corporeality overwhelmingly objectify the city and ascribe to it a series of characteristics that mark it as other. That the experiential aspect has been not just downplayed but entirely overlooked by the existing criticism is evident when we consider that not a single commentator has asked: if Lila is Naples what does Elena, her double and rival, represent? As narrator, of course, Elena shapes the construction of Lila-Naples as an exotic, seductive and dangerous other. Her educational trajectory, her associations with establishment culture and her easy mobility among the cities of northern and central Italy all combine to suggest that what Elena represents is a nationally inflected version of the “northern gaze” prevailing throughout the historical repertoire of discourses relating to Naples. Deeply implicated in the discourse of modernity, that gaze is also imbricated with patriarchal ideology and the orientalism of the practice of cultural imperialism.<sup>14</sup> However, in the metafictional declaration towards the end of the narrative that the only truly worthwhile book she ever produced and the best she wrote *about Naples* is her last one, dedicated to a difficult and demanding friendship (*Storia della bambina perduta*, 441–43), Elena attempts to guide her readers towards a new way of approaching the city. In entitling that work *Un’amicizia*, Elena signals the centrality of the relational dynamic over and

between Alfonso and Naples as queer, see Fusillo and De Rogatis “Metamorfosi”; on Gigliola’s corpse and Naples, see Wehling-Giorgi.

<sup>14</sup> To speak of the “northern gaze” is to locate the geopolitical centre of what parades as a “conquering gaze from nowhere” (Haraway 381) in the historical repertoire of discourses and knowledge about Naples. Where for de Rogatis, the tetralogy reveals a discrimination which is not only ethnic in its North-South bias but also internal to the Neapolitan middle-class which “cerca in ogni modo di non farsi contaminare dall’esistenza del popolo con cui convive da secoli” (*Parole chiave* 137), my interpretation insists on the alignment between the Neapolitan middle-class and the ideals and discourses of the Italian nation-state.

above the metaphorical representation of the narrated object to her understanding of the city. On that understanding, Naples is not a passive or static object of a disembodied gaze but an active agent in a dynamic set of relations, in which the narrating subject is implicated in and shaped by the very object of narration she seeks to shape. It is, then, to Elena and her experience of Naples that I now turn.

### **Elena and the Experiential Aspect**

In keeping with John Power's observation that "for all of Lila's defiant grandeur, these books are finally about Elena," it is Elena's bodily experience of Naples that shapes the relationship between urban space and the body in the Neapolitan Novels. Where the unruly Lila is configured as the primary metaphorical embodiment of Naples, her disciplined double, Elena, as focalizer and narrator of the text evades somatopic objectification and is aligned with the supposedly "disembodied" knowledge (Haraway) of official culture and associated discourses pertaining to modernity and the nation-state.<sup>15</sup> Key to that alignment is Elena's extraordinary educational trajectory, which sees her advancing not only to secondary school, a rarity among her peers, but also to third-level education at the prestigious Scuola Normale in Pisa. The geographical and social mobility afforded Elena and her success in penetrating the highest echelons of Italy's academic and cultural establishment are, however, contingent upon her rejection of Naples and the culture of the *rione* from which she emerged, a rejection epitomised by her preference for Italian over the dialect of the *rione*.<sup>16</sup> As we will see, however, in the final stages of the tetralogy, Elena will come to "decolonise" her understanding of Naples just as — in the wake of her encounter with feminism — she learns to adjust her perception of the establishment culture she has so successfully penetrated without ever fully "mastering." She will thereby come to a new appreciation of Naples and effect a new understanding of the city not as antithetical to the nation-state and its imbrication with the discourse of modernity but as contiguous with Italian and Western culture more broadly.

<sup>15</sup> The contrast is established from the outset; Lila is portrayed as an incorrigibly unruly subject, impervious to authority, in clear contrast to Elena's susceptibility to the disciplinary power of the school teacher's role: "[...] mi impressionò subito perché era molto cattiva. Eravamo tutte un po' cattive, in quella classe, ma solo quando la maestra Oliviero non poteva vederci. Lei invece era cattiva sempre" (*L'amica geniale*, 27).

<sup>16</sup> The repudiation of the dialect as part of a wider rejection of a culture experienced as violent and atavistic characterises all of Ferrante's intellectual female protagonists. *L'amore molesto*'s Delia, for instance, shares with Elena a difficulty in understanding the dialect; her rare use of dialect is construed as a descent into unknown territory: "[...] scivolavo con fastidio [...] nel dialetto [...] un dialetto senza naturalezza, usato con imperizia, pronunciato stentamente come una lingua straniera mal nota" (22).

The correlation between Elena's education and her relationship with Naples is established early in the tetralogy, in that her first encounter with the city of Naples proper, beyond the confines of the *rione*, coincides with her registration for secondary school. The occasion represents a watershed separating Elena's future from Lila's; it provides Elena with access to the vast expanse of the city and secures her alignment with the modernising mission of the Italian nation-state and with an establishment culture antithetical to and suspicious of the atavistic space and practices of the *rione*. In the narration of Elena's first encounter with the city proper, it is the experiential aspect — the city as experienced — that dominates. Though largely unconscious of her own corporeality, Elena's responses to the sights and sounds of the city reflect Ferrante's assertion that Naples "non è un luogo qualsiasi, è un prolungamento del corpo, è una matrice della percezione, è il termine di paragone di ogni esperienza" (*La frantumaglia*, 60). Traversing the city from Piazza Garibaldi to Via Toledo, Elena's father draws her attention to important historical and cultural sites, including the Albergo dei poveri, the botanical gardens, the archaeological museum, Port'Alba and Piazza Dante, and highlights the modernity of the city's perennial process of construction and reconstruction (*L'amica geniale*, 133). The positive account of Elena's first encounter with the city beyond the *rione* reflects the rarity of spending an entire day in the company of her father, feeling "amata, coccolata" (132).<sup>17</sup> In accordance with the established somatopic repertoire, Naples is experienced by Elena as an assault on the senses, an intensely festive riot of sensation, benevolence and radiance, posited as a marked contrast to the mundane tensions of the *rione*: "Fui sopraffatta dai nomi, dal rumore del traffico, dalle voci, dai colori, dall'aria di festa che c'era in giro, dallo sforzo di tenere tutto a mente per poi parlarne con Lila [. . .]. Possibile che solo il nostro rione fosse così pieno di tensioni e violenze, mentre il resto della città era radioso, benevolo?" (133).<sup>18</sup>

This first encounter with the city proper also highlights the interrelationship between urban space and identity construction. Just as the city now appears benevolent and radiant, with Elena's promotion to secondary school promising a new life ahead, so too her father's easy negotiation and command of the city frames him in a new light. Elena observes of her father, "Per strada si comportava con una socievolezza, una cortesia lenta, che in casa non aveva quasi mai"

<sup>17</sup> This episode resonates with the promise of the "bella giornata" idealised in Raffaele La Capria's *Ferito a morte*, set in 1954.

<sup>18</sup> The closing contrast between the *rione* and Naples proper recalls that between Recanati, "il natio borgo selvaggio," and the imagined greater civility of life beyond the town's boundaries in the early works of Giacomo Leopardi.

(*L'amica geniale*, 132), and that “aveva il dono di riuscire simpatico, dono che nel rione e in casa teneva nascosto” (135). The final destination has a similarly dramatic and regenerative effect on the narrator herself: the panorama of Vesuvius and the Bay of Naples from the seafront at Via Caracciolo elicits in Elena a sense of exhilaration, power and promise. Imagining herself “sola nel nuovo della città, nuova io stessa con tutta la vita davanti, esposta alla furia mobile delle cose ma sicuramente vincitrice” (134), the energetic space of the city is perceived to be pregnant with the promise of a radiant future that is forever foreclosed to Lila in her confinement within the space of the *rione*.

The delight that accompanies Elena's first experience of Naples is never again reiterated, however.<sup>19</sup> Instead, over the course of her adolescence, the imaginary border between the *rione* and the city proper is gradually eroded as Elena's peers also begin to venture beyond the confines of the *rione* and into more elegant quarters. The result is a redrawing of the moral geography of the city's corporeality, under the impression that the *rione* had “inglobato tutta Napoli, anche la gente perbene” (*L'amica geniale*, 192). Nonetheless, it is only with Elena's university years in *Storia del nuovo cognome* that Naples as a whole comes to be seen in the negative light previously reserved for the *rione* alone. Instrumental to Elena's changed perception is her encounter with Pisa, construed as an intellectual haven and, as such, “una città agli antipodi del rione di Napoli” (333). Pisa exposes Elena for the first time to the othering of the South deriving from the late-nineteenth century discourse of *meridionalismo*. Stephanie V. Love detects the heightened significance of an incident in which Elena is accused of stealing by a Roman girl who had previously made fun of her accent.<sup>20</sup> The attitude of the girl is riven through with the racist construction of Neapolitans in Italian culture. If, as Love identifies, the accusation represents a leveraging of the Roman girl's relatively greater Northernness with respect to

<sup>19</sup> Occasional reminders of the exceptional beauty of Naples, tinged with bitterness, cluster in the third volume, *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*. Here, on visiting Gigliola in Michele Solara's house, Elena finds herself “ipnotizzata dalla bellezza di Napoli [. . .]. Lo scempio della città offriva a caro prezzo punti di vista in cemento su un paesaggio straordinario, Michele ne aveva acquistato uno memorabile” (183). Similarly, on an early morning walk in the city before leaving to marry, Elena observes the beauty of Mergellina and Posillipo and wonders “quale sentimento avrei avuto di Napoli, di me, se mi fossi svegliata tutte le mattine non al rione ma in uno di quei palazzi della litoranea” (205).

<sup>20</sup> In a perceptive and detailed study focused primarily on the first two volumes, Love identifies the dichotomy between the school and the *rione* as “the primary motif of the ‘modernist chronotope’ [. . .] through which Ferrante brings to life the powerful hegemonic discourses and counterdiscourses of post-WWII Italian modernity” (72). A study of the entire tetralogy suggests that while the school/*rione* pairing is central to the first two volumes, it is the dichotomy between Naples and the Italian nation-state that is “the primary symbolic, ideological and embodied narrative dichotomy” (Love 72) that structures the tetralogy as a whole.



Elena's Neapolitan origins, it also represents an attempt on the part of a subject whose own identity is tainted by the Southernness denigrated in the national hierarchy to "pose" as northern in order to "pass" as Italian.<sup>21</sup> Elena's immediate response — a violent slap and a torrent of insults in dialect — reflects the impotence and unspeakability of the subaltern Southern subject with respect to the hegemonic discursive framing of national modernity. Her longer-term response, however, is to align ever more closely with that discursive framing by adopting a similarly negative stance in relation to Naples as that enshrined within the national stereotype.

Accordingly, and in marked contrast to the depiction of her first encounter with the city, subsequent depictions of Naples construe it not as a festive, benevolent and radiant space pregnant with the promise of self-realisation but as a dark threat to Elena's personal freedom and progress. In line with the construction of Naples as "un prolungamento del corpo, [...] una matrice della percezione," it is in and on the body that the threat is registered:

Già quando il treno entrava in stazione diventavo nervosa. Temevo che un qualsiasi incidente m'impedisce di ritornare in Normale alla fine delle vacanze: una malattia grave che mi obbligasse a un ricovero nel caos di un ospedale, qualche evento terribile che mi imponesse di smettere di studiare perché la famiglia aveva bisogno di me.

(*L'amica geniale*, 395)

The threat ascribed to Naples mirrors that embodied by the seductively brilliant Lila, configured throughout as a rival and potential risk to Elena's hard-won gains. The threat of physical detention persists long after Elena's student years have come to an end and recurs to some extent throughout the tetralogy. In *Storia del nuovo cognome*, for instance, Elena laments, "Non è possibile che io resti prigioniera per sempre di questo posto e di questa gente" (435), while in *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, we are told on one occasion that "temevo a ogni ritorno che un imprevisto mi avrebbe impedito di sfuggirle" (18) and, on another: "[...] mi sentì riafferrata dalla città, comandata dalle sue leggi non scritte" (290–91). As a result, fleeing Naples — a frequent topos in Ferrante's oeuvre as well as in the broader literary tradition of the city — is a recurrent refrain for Elena whose

<sup>21</sup> Contrary to Williams' distinction between posing as the exhibition of artifice and passing as the suppression of that artifice (176), I understand "posing" here as a conscious performance of the identity of another (the moral northerner) and "passing" as the successful, undetected masquerade of identity.



marriage, even, is conceived of in terms of an escape: “l’essenziale era andarmene da Napoli” (41).<sup>22</sup>

Underlying the threat of physical detention associated with Naples is the idea of regression enshrined in national stereotypes of the South as backward and primitive. If this is implicit throughout the presentation of Elena’s feelings of repulsion for her mother’s physical deficiencies, it is also neatly illustrated by the episode of Elena’s visit to see Lila in San Giovanni a Teduccio in *Storia del nuovo cognome*. Here, Elena suggests that Lila’s move to the fringes of the city following the breakdown of her marriage to Stefano is a regression, “quasi che Lila fosse andata ad abitare [. . .] in un rivolo del tempo passato, prima che andassimo a scuola, un tempo senza norma e senza rispetto” (454). In reality, however, the regression is Elena’s own (“Per arrivare a San Giovanni dovetti per forza regredire,” 454), conveyed in the moralising terms of *meridionalismo*. Frustrated by her inability to navigate the city with ease, discomforted by the crush of “corpi miserabili” on public transport, and affronted by the invasive touch of wandering male hands, she finds herself resorting to “il dialetto più violento del rione” (454), uttering “parole irrifribili come quelle che sapeva dire mia madre e soprattutto Lila” (455).<sup>23</sup> She emerges from the journey “disfatta, scapigliata” (454), corporeally and spiritually diminished by her encounter with the uncivilized South embodied by the plebeian masses of the Neapolitan peripheries. On the one hand, the corporeality of the experience and the condescending language in which the episode is narrated reveals Elena’s alignment with the hegemonic “northern gaze” on Naples and the moral geography associated with “long-standing anxieties about ‘primitive’ elements in the national population” (Ben-Ghiat, 3–4). On the other, the episode exposes the limitations of both the nation-state’s claim to modernity and the purportedly “disembodied” knowledge constituted by Elena’s education. Indeed, Elena is forced to conclude that all the refinements she has acquired in the course of her education have exposed

<sup>22</sup> From Delia in *L’amore molesto* to Olga in *I giorni dell’abbandono* and Leda in *La figlia oscura*, Ferrante’s female protagonists are cultured women who have rejected the city and culture of their birth but who are psychologically marked by the experiences of their childhood in Naples. On the prevalence of the topos of escape from Naples in the wider literary corpus, see Ramondino and Müller (Parte terza).

<sup>23</sup> The depiction of Naples as a regressive space characterized by quotidian abuses of women’s bodies on the part of tyrannically overbearing and sexually aggressive men is pervasive in Ferrante’s fiction. The account of Elena’s journey is particularly reminiscent of a similarly extended passage in *L’amore molesto* (60–63), which portrays the enforced proximity of the crowded bus as the site of women’s systematic humiliation and abuse on the part of men who “si servivano delle femmine per giocare in silenzio tra sé e sé” (63). Meanwhile Elena’s recourse to the violence of the dialect — frequently constructed in Ferrante’s work as the atavistic response of wounded women — is most directly prefigured in *La figlia oscura*, where Nina “sibilò insulti in dialetto, terribili come quelli che sapevano pronunciare mia nonna, mia madre” (140).

her as ready prey on the streets of Naples and left her ill adapted to the mundane aggression of the Italian South.<sup>24</sup> The episode thus appears to validate the *meridionalisti's* fear of the primitive Southern body thwarting national progress and impeding its claim to modernity.

### **Lila Interrupted: The Desecrated Corpse of Naples**

The third volume of the tetralogy, *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, opens with a dramatic disruption to the narrative chronology. A flash forward to Elena's final meeting with Lila in 2005, amid the discovery of the lifeless body of their childhood friend, Gigliola, in the neighbourhood park, ruptures the metaphorical alignment of Lila and Naples established in the earlier volumes. The positioning of the corpse at the very centre of the tetralogy combines with its dislocation in time and place to mark its symbolic and somatopic importance. Over the course of a page, the narrative shifts from a dispassionate account of the final encounter between the two friends to an emotionally charged description of the corpse, to suggest a psychological displacement of emotion from Lila's absent body — a body that cannot be mourned — to Gigliola's obscenely present and abject body (Kristeva).<sup>25</sup> That the narrative reflection on Gigliola's corpse moves rapidly thereafter to an extended meditation on Naples signals the continuity between the body and the city in the mind of the narrator and the dynamics of the text. Crucially, this scene, lying quite literally at the centre of the tetralogy, effects a radical reorientation of the somatopic dynamic away from the metaphorical corporeal representation of Naples as contrary to "rational" models of modernity and towards a new alignment between Naples, Italy and the wider world.

Although subsequently revealed to be the result of natural causes, Gigliola's death and the sight of her grossly enlarged body and distorted features ("era straordinariamente grassa [. . .]. Il viso bello si era guastato," *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, 16) are experienced by Elena as an act of violence. Natalie Bakopolous observes that who Gigliola is is important (406). A direct contemporary of Lila and Elena, who proceeds to secondary school but fails to complete her studies, Gigliola represents what might have become of Elena had she not progressed to

<sup>24</sup> "Le buone maniere, la voce e l'aspetto curati, la ressa nella testa e sulla lingua di ciò che avevo imparato sui libri, erano tutti segnali immediati di debolezza che mi rendevano una preda sicura, di quelle che non si divincolano" (*Storia del nuovo cognome* 454).

<sup>25</sup> The contagious quality of abjection described by Kristeva in relation to the symptom — "the abject permeates me, I become abject" (11) — neatly encapsulates Elena's response to the sight of Gigliola's corpse.

university and escaped the oppressive power dynamics of the *rione*.<sup>26</sup> Viewed through Elena's critical gaze, Gigliola's disfigured corpse is a symbolically charged reflection of the fate of her contemporaries — "Quante persone che erano state bambine insieme a noi non erano più vive," she reflects (*Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, 16) — and that of post-war Naples.

The alignment between Gigliola's corporeal constitution and that of Naples is established by the smooth transition from Elena's contemplation of Gigliola's body to her extended meditation on the city. Rather than being confined to the elaboration of Naples as "the locus of raw violence and hostility," as Katrin Wehling-Giorgi has posited (209), the meditation on Naples ranges broadly over the diverse constructions of Naples presented over the course of the tetralogy.<sup>27</sup> In providing analeptic resonances of episodes already recounted and proleptic allusion to events yet to occur, it constitutes both a *mise en abyme* and a *summa* of the tetralogy's understanding of Naples. The meditation opens with Elena's early impression of the city proper as distinct from the *rione* and a site of wonder — "da ragazzina mi ero immaginata che, oltre il rione, Napoli offrissi meraviglie" (*Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, 17) — before proceeding to dwell at greater length on her revised understanding of the city in her student years. Now seen as contiguous with the *rione*, Naples is depicted in passive terms, as neglected, abandoned and prone to malaise, a place where "la gente moriva d'incuria, di corruzione, di sopraffazione" (17). Projecting forward to the early years of her marriage, the city is contrasted to the central and northern Italian cities where Elena will live and is transformed from a disembodied object of contemplation into an active agent, increasingly experienced as a threat to Elena's personal freedom and fulfilment: "Mentre a Pisa, a Milano, mi sentivo bene [. . .] nella mia città temevo a ogni ritorno che un imprevisto mi avrebbe impedito di sfuggirle, che le cose che mi ero conquistata mi sarebbero state tolte" (18). Only in a subsequent period, the late 1970s, is the city construed and experienced by Elena as a *locus horribilis* in the terms outlined by Wehling-Giorgi: a site of raw violence and hostility, characterised by "Morti, feriti. E grida, mazzate, bombe carta" (*Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, 19). That construction combines with a pathological perspective to portray the diseased body of the city as consuming itself

<sup>26</sup> Indeed, at the end of the tetralogy, Elena returns to the episode of Gigliola's death, stating: "non riesco più a sentirmi diversa da questo corpo grande che giace senza vita in questo luogo squallido [. . .] ora mi accorgevo che ero come Gigliola" (*Storia della bambina perduta*, 439).

<sup>27</sup> Wehling-Giorgi's description of "the wounds inflicted on the childhood friend's deformed body" (209) misrepresents the text but encapsulates the violence of Elena's experience of being confronted with the body of her childhood friend, a body that is disfigured not as a result of wounding or death but out of neglect, abandonment and lack of care.

and threatening others with the “pent-up rage and festering poison” (Wehling-Giorgi 209) seeping into the bodies that inhabit and traverse Naples:

Pareva che la città covasse nelle viscere una furia che non riusciva a venir fuori e perciò la erodeva, o erompeva in pustule di superficie, gonfie di veleno contro tutti, bambini, adulti, vecchi, gente di altre città, americani della Nato, turisti d’ogni nazionalità, gli stessi napoletani.  
(*Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, 19)

Finally, in a reflection of the new appreciation that Elena will come to in the latter phase of her life, both the *rione* and Naples come to be viewed not as exceptional to the course of Italian or Western history but as aligned with and emblematic of the wider, universal human condition: “il rione rimandava alla città, la città all’Italia, l’Italia all’Europa, l’Europa a tutto il pianeta. E oggi la vedo così: non è il rione a essere malato, non è Napoli, è il globo terrestre, è l’universo, o gli universi” (*Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, 19).<sup>28</sup> This last interpretative frame counters the earlier and historic understanding of Naples as an urban Other and will emerge in *Storia della bambina perduta* as the ultimate destination of the intellectual and emotional journey undertaken by Elena in relation to Naples over the course of the tetralogy.

Given the central narrative positioning of the discovery of Gigliola’s corpse and its status as a springboard to a comprehensive reflection on Naples, it may be tempting to consider Gigliola’s body as the ultimate somatope of Naples — her trajectory from the promise and beauty of youth, through gross enlargement to lonely death giving expression to the disfigurement, decline and abandonment suffered by the city in the postwar period.<sup>29</sup> Rather than displacing Lila, however, I would suggest Gigliola’s corpse is best understood as supplemental to, and a kaleidoscopic refraction of, the metaphorical alignment between body and city established in the first half of the tetralogy. As we will see, the disruption to the metaphorical aspect of the relationship between body and city will soon

<sup>28</sup> Emblematic of Elena’s evolving understanding of Naples’ position vis-à-vis modernity is her attitude towards the skyscrapers constructed near the *rione* at different historical moments. A sense of pride in the railway station tower under construction during her adolescence — “era il *nostro* grattacielo, anche se stava fuori da rione” (*Storia di chi resta e di chi fugge*, 17) — is replaced by disillusionment when construction stalls during her university years and the building appears “più che il simbolo di una comunità che si stava rinnovando [...] un ulteriore nido dell’inefficienza” (17). Later in time, it is scepticism that characterises her response to the “bagliori dei grattacieli di vetro” of the Centro Direzionale: “segni una volta di un futuro raggiante cui non aveva creduto mai nessuno” (16).

<sup>29</sup> For Falotico, Gigliola’s corpse represents less the story of the entire city than a more limited “*mise en abîme* dell’epopea di quartiere” (104).

be followed by a more radical disruption to the experiential aspect premised on Elena's alignment with the "northern gaze" prevailing in the historical repertoire of discourses on Naples.

### The Feminist-Postcolonial Critique

Fundamental to the dramatic transformation of Elena's understanding of Naples over the second half of the tetralogy is her encounter with feminism, in the form of Carla Lonzi's *Sputiamo su Hegel*. Deeply affected by the essay's seminal critique of the patriarchal foundations of all knowledge and culture, Elena recognizes herself in Lonzi's articulation of the compromised female self who strives to "master" a culture modelled on "capacità maschili," as we read in the following quote:

Avevo ecceduto, m'ero sforzata di darmi capacità maschili. Credevo di dover sapere tutto, occuparmi di tutto. Cosa mi importava della politica, delle lotte. Volevo fare bella figura con gli uomini, essere all'altezza. All'altezza di cosa. Della loro ragione, la più irragionevole.  
(*Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, 256)

In accordance with this realisation, Elena responds warmly to Lonzi's exhortation to "deculturalizzarsi [. . .] sbarazzarsi della dialettica servo-padrone. Strapparsi dal cervello l'inferiorità. [. . .] Muoversi su un altro piano in nome della propria differenza" (254). Contrasting her own experience of passively absorbing the knowledge enshrined in books with Lonzi's active deployment of such knowledge to overthrow — "pensare contro" — the patriarchal assumptions upon which it rests, Elena recognizes in the philosopher's "sfrontata libertà di pensiero" (254) something akin to Lila's innate critical disposition. Indeed, throughout her reading of Lonzi, the figure of Lila looms before Elena as an equally formidable point of reference for the compromised self. The pairing of her identity with that of Lila and the competitive rivalry that their friendship entails amounts to no less a mutilation of the self than that the attempt to master the culture of the patriarchy: "mi ero sommata a lei, e mi sentivo mutilata appena mi sottraevo" (256–57).<sup>30</sup>

If, in the first instance, Elena's encounter with feminism results in a reinvigoration of her writing career with a book on the patriarchal essence of the

<sup>30</sup> This initial insight will be reinforced by the subsequent recognition that "*Il mio diventare era diventare dentro la sua scia*" and that "Dovevo ricominciare a *diventare*, ma per me da adulta, fuori di lei" (*Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, 316).



cultural fabrication of Woman as Other, its deeper and more lasting effect is a reprogramming of Elena's relationship with Lila and Naples. Though never overtly acknowledged, Elena's awakening to the patriarchal nature of the body of knowledge and culture in which she was educated implies a questioning and a "disimparare" (*Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, 256) of the binary and impartial nature of associated discourses that depict Naples and the Italian south — like the female subject — as irrational, primitive and inferior to the rationality and modernity of the centre-north. Indeed, the very fact that the language of post-colonial critique is grafted onto Elena's articulation of her feminist awakening in the later assertion that "mi sono inventata dai maschi, colonizzata dalla loro immaginazione" (*Storia della bambina perduta*, 47) implies an equation between the discursive colonization of the female self on the part of the patriarchy and the equivalent colonization of Naples and the South by the Piedmontese fathers of the Italian nation-state.<sup>31</sup> However, where the feminist experience engenders in Elena a new appreciation of feminine difference with respect to male identity and culture, the new understanding of Naples that emerges erodes the very concept of Neapolitan difference; it repositions the city not as other to a model of modernity implicitly located elsewhere but as contiguous with modernity itself. Significantly, that new configuration is premised upon the abandonment of the somatopic dynamic so central to the earlier novels of the tetralogy and to the wider cultural corpus, thereby equating corporeality with the construction of Naples as Other.

Evidence of the changed understanding of Naples' relationship with modernity first emerges in the final stages of *Storia di chi resta e di chi fugge*, when Elena begins to view her own life in Florence as a pale reflection of Lila's experiences in Naples. On learning of Lila's facility with cutting-edge computer technology, Elena admits to having "l'impressione che lì nel rione, tra arretratezza e modernità, lei avesse più storia di me" (315). If that depiction of the *rione* as simultaneously backward and hypermodern recalls Chambers' depiction of Naples as a "violent mixture of antiquated street rites and global-design capitalism" (73), it also accords with his appreciation of the city as one that "proposes its own particular configuration of modern life" (74). Elena's recognition of the distinctive modernity of the *rione*, represented not only by Lila but also the aggressive expansion of the Solara business empire, disrupts the binary structure

<sup>31</sup> De Rogatis has characterized Elena's education as "il sistematico addestramento di una colonizzata" but limits her critique to the patriarchal structures that cause Elena to "celare dentro di sé 'la femmina nella sua espressione più allarmante'" ("Metamorfosi," 133). My reading extends the critique to incorporate the similar repression of the Neapolitan self-inherent in Elena's educational conditioning.



underpinning the supposed alterity of Naples — and the *rione* as its ultimate expression — with respect to the modernity of the Italian centre-north, and sets up her return to the city and the radical restructuring of her relationship with Naples in the final volume of the tetralogy.

Elena's stay in Naples spans 1979–95, a period incorporating both the lows of the 1980 earthquake and the subsequent expansion of Camorra power and the highs of civic resurgence under the mayoral leadership of Antonio Bassolino. There is little to encourage a positive re-evaluation of Naples at the outset of the final volume, *Storia della bambina perduta*; the city continues to be portrayed as “una città disordinata” (79), which “fa schifo esattamente come prima” (37) and where the friends' male peers will suffer violent deaths as a result of heroin addiction (Rino), homophobic attack (Alfonso), and Camorra feuding (Michele and Marcello Solara). Nonetheless, and despite the tragedy of the unexplained disappearance of Lila's three-year-old daughter, Tina, a sense of reconciliation pervades the volume. Social problems and violence previously viewed as particular to Naples or the *rione* and evidence of the city's regressive nature now come to be seen as part of a wider national process of “degrado e corruzione che dalla violenza terroristica porta al sistema generalizzato del malaffare di Tangentopoli” (Falotico, 113). Lila, for instance, observes of Naples that “si muore ammazzati come in ogni parte d'Italia” (*Storia della bambina perduta*, 36), while Elena begins to view the *rione* as comparatively innocuous: “certe volte il rione mi sembrava più tranquillo del resto d'Italia. Non era così naturalmente, la violenza era la solita” (147). Even the earthquake, with its physical devastation and its enduring psychological legacy, has the effect of renewing Elena's ties with her origins — with Lila, whose second pregnancy coincides with Elena's third; with her former schoolfriends and peers who “mi volevano reintegrare a pieno titolo nel rione” (198); and with her mother. This last reconciliation, which coincides with her mother's terminal decline, is epitomised by Elena's positive response to her mother's body, the primitive and repugnant Other of her childhood and youth. Surprised to find that “i contatti col suo corpo, che quando era sana m'infastidivano, adesso mi piacevano” (194), Elena even acquires her mother's limp after her death and welcomes it as “un lascito custodito nel mio stesso corpo” (207).

The positive response of her publisher to her manuscript on Naples plays the final and decisive role in reconciling Elena to her origins. Reading the book as an extraordinary “sistemazione in forma di romanzo dell'esperienza che avevo avuto della Napoli più povera e violenta” (*Storia della bambina perduta*, 243), the publisher erroneously attributes the strength of the book to Elena's return to her

native city (243).<sup>32</sup> Despite the fact that the book had been written in Florence several years before, the publisher's approval encourages an already receptive Elena to "guardare la città e soprattutto il rione come una parte importante della mia vita dalla quale non solo non dovevo prescindere ma che era essenziale alla buona riuscita del mio lavoro" (243). That same approval, in direct contrast to Lila's earlier dismissal of the book as "brutto, brutto, brutto" (*Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta* 247), finally releases Elena from her subjugation to Lila and frees her to view her relationship with her friend and her origins in the *rione* in an entirely different light:

[. . .] le avevo attribuito fin dall'infanzia un peso eccessivo e ora mi sentivo come sgravata. Finalmente era chiaro che ciò che ero io non era lei, e viceversa. La sua autorità non mi era più necessaria, avevo la mia. Mi sentii forte, non più vittima delle mie origini, capace di dominarle, di dar loro una forma, di riscattarle per me, per Lila, per chiunque. Ciò che prima mi tirava in basso, adesso era materia per andare più in alto.

(*Storia della bambina perduta*, 244)

### Writing Naples Anew

In accordance with Elena's deliverance from her attachment to Lila and reassessment of her origins, there emerges in the final sections of the tetralogy a new appreciation of Naples. No longer constrained within the prism of the "northern gaze" and somatopic configuration, the city emerges as a subject on its own terms.

The penultimate section, "Vecchiaia. Storia del cattivo sangue," opens with the declaration: "Sono andata via da Napoli definitivamente nel 1995, quando tutti dicevano che la città stava risorgendo. Ma ormai credevo poco alle sue resurrezioni" (*Storia della bambina perduta*, 317). Rooted in the disenchantment arising from the negative outcomes of previous utopian projects intended to regenerate the city, Elena's cynicism regarding the "Neapolitan Renaissance" of the 1990s resonates strongly with Chambers' writings on the city. Her summation of the "Renaissance" as but "cipria della modernità spruzzata a casaccio, e in maniera sbruffona, sopra la faccia corrotta della città" (317) recalls Chambers' critique of the superficial imposition of "the glass-and-steel façades of an official modernity" (74) on the city's "crumbling historical core" (72). Moreover, and

<sup>32</sup> The publisher's comments are highly evocative of the critical reception of Ferrante's work and perhaps allude to the erroneous nature of autobiographical readings of the tetralogy.

again reflecting Chambers' characterization of Naples as a city that "reveals less about its own shortcomings than about the limits and illusions of modernity itself" (87), Elena refashions Naples as a critical mirror on modernity, presenting it as "la grande metropoli europea dove con maggiore chiarezza la fiducia nelle tecniche, nella scienza, nello sviluppo economico, nella bontà della natura, nella storia che porta necessariamente verso il meglio, nella democrazia si era rivelata con largo anticipo del tutto priva di fondamento" (*Storia della bambina perduta*, 319). Fully disabused of belief in the progressive discourse of modernity and alert to its contradictions and negative effects, she reconsiders the cynicism of her fellow Neapolitans as a productive and critical response to an illusory ideology premised on the violence of exclusion: "essere nati in questa città [. . .] serve solo a una cosa: sapere da sempre, quasi per istinto, ciò che oggi tra mille distinguo cominciano a sostenere tutti: il sogno di progresso senza limiti è in realtà un incubo pieno di ferocia e morte" (319). Naples is thus presented as a city ahead of its time, providing privileged access to a truth only beginning to be grasped by the world at large.

This new appreciation of Naples is complemented in the closing pages of the tetralogy by a fresh approach to the city and its articulation. Invested in Lila, who develops a passionate interest in Naples in the years following her daughter's disappearance, and who thus becomes the source of a "situated knowledge" (Haraway) about — rather than a metaphorical embodiment of — the city, the new approach amounts to a Naples-centred, feminist alternative to the disembodied, patriarchal "northern gaze" historically imposed on the city and traceable especially in the "testimonianze di viaggiatori stranieri dentro cui" Lila "pareva di rintracciare incanto e ripulsione insieme" (*Storia della bambina perduta*, 424).<sup>33</sup> Lila's passion for Naples and her ambition to write a book dedicated to the city "nella sua interezza, un programma spropositato" (417) are communicated to Elena by her youngest daughter Imma, who accompanies Lila on her urban perambulations, absorbing her fascination with the city's history. Lila's enthusiastic depiction of Naples as a "città splendida e significativa" (419) and her ability to transform the city into "[il] posto più memorabile del mondo, in quello più ricco di significati" (423) defies the alterity associated with the

<sup>33</sup> Elena herself, in writing from Florence had fallen prey to the temptations of the northern gaze, only to revert to a more realist tradition familiar in the writings of Neapolitan writers on her return to the city: "A Firenze avevo inventato una trama attingendo ai fatti della mia infanzia e della mia adolescenza con la spericolatezza che mi veniva dalla distanza. Napoli, vista da lì, era quasi un luogo della fantasia, una città come quella dei film [. . .]. Poi, da quando mi ero trasferita [. . .] mi ero presa una smania di realtà, e pur evitando di nominarlo avevo raccontato il rione" (*Storia della bambina perduta*, 266–67).

city in the “northern gaze” and repositions Naples at the very centre of historical processes and civilizations.

The particular combination of archival research, observant perambulation and impassioned articulation that constitutes Lila’s approach to the city exemplifies Chambers’ contention that Naples “requires us to supplement a taxonomic cartography with an ‘atlas of emotion’” (92).<sup>34</sup> The heightened corporeality that characterises Naples in the “northern gaze” is supplanted in Chambers’ formulation by a more nuanced appreciation of the city as the site of embodied practices contributing to a partial, locatable and critical knowledge (Haraway 585). Imma’s subsequent walks with her mother, recounting the rich histories that Lila had conveyed to her, not only bring the city’s history to life for Elena for the first time but also recall her first encounter with the city in the company of her father. While both father and daughter highlight similar sites of historical and artistic importance (the botanical garden, the museum, Capodimonte), the circulation of knowledge from Lila to Imma to Elena represents a fluid, female and filial alternative to the hierarchy inherent in the patriarchal model of knowledge transfer practiced by Elena’s father.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, the very circularity of the new dynamic of exchange complements the cyclical philosophy of history embedded in Lila’s delineation of “una Napoli ciclica dove tutto era meraviglioso e tutto diventava grigio e dissennato e tutto ritornava a scintillare” (*Storia della bambina perduta*, 419). Lila’s insistence on the cyclical order of things is interpreted by Elena as a sympathetic attempt to attenuate the stormy tribulations of Imma’s teenage years. However, a passing allusion to Neapolitan Enlightenment philosopher Giambattista Vico, the foremost proponent of a cyclical philosophy of history and a touchstone for Chambers (105–07), combines with Lila’s discussion of Naples’ geophysical formation — “qua c’è il Vesuvio che ti ricorda ogni giorno che la più grande impresa degli uomini potenti, l’opera più splendida, il fuoco, e il terremoto, e la cenere e il mare in pochi secondi te la riducono a niente” (*Storia della bambina perduta*, 419) — to convey the wider import of her conceptual framework. Implicit in the association between the geophysical and the philosophical is the sense that Naples not only exposes the illusions and limitations of human achievements and, thereby, of the progressive logic of modernity and of a body of

<sup>34</sup> The phrase “atlas of emotion” is derived from Bruno’s study, which shares with that of Chambers a debt of influence to De Certeau’s theorization of walking in the city (91–110).

<sup>35</sup> The authoritative patriarchal model is also represented by Pietro who, on his first visit to the city, displaces Elena’s father as guide to Naples’ historical and literary heritage for the passively receptive female audience constituted by Elena and her mother (*Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, 83).

knowledge that is deeply implicated in geopolitical dynamics of power; it also provides an alternative model of historical understanding to that upon which the claims of modernity are premised.

### **Conclusion: Naples Beyond the Somatope**

Ferrante's "Neapolitan Novels" close with Naples in the ascendancy. From the denigrated and marginalised object of a self-serving northern gaze, deeply invested in the progressive logic of modernity, the city emerges as the subject of its own narration. Crucial to the formulation of a new perspective on Naples is the narrating Elena's encounter with feminism, inflected with postcolonial critique, and the associated dissipation of the somatopic construction of the city so prevalent in the wider cultural repertoire. Discernible in the more accepting approach Elena gradually brings to the city and its bodies, the transformation is best exemplified by the altered role assigned to Lila. From metaphorical embodiment of the city's alterity, Lila comes to serve as the vehicle of expression of Naples' distinctive historical and cultural constitution, and as the proponent of a Naples-centred philosophy of history attuned to the illusions of modernity and the vulnerability of humans to the overwhelming power of the forces of nature.

Viewed in that light, Lila's mysterious disappearance may be seen as the end-point of a process of re-education that begins at the start of *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*. Associated with Elena's journey of self-discovery — from her awakening to the patriarchal and orientalist bias of her educational formation to her mature rejection of the same — the process is one that exposes the inextricable association between corporeality and discourses of alterity in the somatopic construction of the city in the cultural repertoire. Elena's rejection of the "northern gaze" works to ensure that, by the end of the tetralogy, the city is no longer a site of corporeal shock or regression and Lila no longer a metaphorical embodiment of its supposed alterity. Indeed, we might even conjecture that Lila's unexplained disappearance signals the superseding of the somatopic construction of Naples and the waning of an outmoded, partial and prejudicial body of knowledge about the city.

Ferrante's project thus represents an ambitious attempt to tackle the somatopic structures underpinning the construction of Naples in the wider cultural repertoire and, in the light of feminist and postcolonial critique, to transcend them. Rather than jettisoning the corporeal altogether, what emerges is a new understanding of embodied practice and expression as a counter to the objectifying lens of a disembodied "northern gaze" fixated on the reified body of an



Other. That being the case, it is important to acknowledge the relative success of the different strategies taken. If, on the one hand, the “Neapolitan Novels” successfully critique the limitations of the northern gaze and its somatopic constitution over the course of Elena’s intellectual journey, it is undoubtedly the case that the seductive power of the narrative is at its peak in the early stages of the tetralogy and in those allusive passages dedicated to Lila as a metaphor for Naples.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the unsettling reappearance of the girls’ childhood dolls at the very close of the narrative, a sign of Lila’s continuing power and influence, may be seen as a tacit admission of the enduring appeal (both intellectual and commercial) of the corporeal metaphor.<sup>37</sup> Elena’s confusion and frustration are testament to the fact that, despite nuanced and effective critique, the “northern gaze” and its perception of Naples are not entirely defunct; their presence haunts the cultural imaginary as they stand ready to be exhumed.

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<sup>36</sup> For de Rogatis, too, “Napoli diventa intensa e intensamente rappresentata tutte le volte che si delinea una topografia simbolica e polifonica” (*Parole chiave*, 128).

<sup>37</sup> Indeed, it might be argued that, in harnessing the canonical construction of a somatopic Naples in its earlier stages, the tetralogy secures its own success, catering to the pre-conceived ideas and the “northern gaze” of a national and international readership that has come to expect such a portrayal.



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